

Chambers-Mayberry House
Northwest corner of Oak Street
and Fifth Avenue
Niobrara
Knox County
Nebraska

HABS No. NE-23

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PHOTOGRAPHS

DESCRIPTIVE AND HISTORICAL DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. NE-23

THE CHAMBERS-MAYBERRY HOUSE

- Location: Northwest corner of Fifth Avenue and Oak Street, Niobrara, Knox County, Nebraska.
- USGS Niobrara Quadrangle Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 14.579500.4733990
- Present Owner: United States of America (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District).
- Present Use: Residence of Mr. and Mrs. William Mayberry, scheduled to be vacated and demolished. (Moved to Crofton, Nebraska after this documentation was written in 1977).
- Significance: The Chambers-Mayberry House was built in 1909 for George Chambers, a prominent citizen of Niobrara. Mr. Chambers was cashier of the Niobrara Valley Bank for years and held controlling interests in the Verdel, Monowia and Lynch Banks. The structure, one of the largest and most elaborate residences in the small rural community of Niobrara, exudes a certain dignity today as it surely did at the time of its completion.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1909-1910.
2. Architect: Joseph A. Cavis, a local architect and builder, who also supervised the construction.
3. Original and subsequent owners: George W. Chambers purchased the property on which the structure stands from his brother and sister-in-law, Edwin H. and Stella Chambers, although construction of the house did not begin until 1909.

The family moved into the new house in January 1910 and the house remained in the Chambers family until 1949.

In 1949, Stewart Chambers (son of George) and heirs of G. W. Chambers' estate (he died in 1913) sold the property to Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Carson for \$4,000. It was later sold to William Mayberry and his wife, the last occupants, in November 1958 for \$6,000. In 1975 the property was sold to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District for its flood control project.

The original and subsequent owners of the house from the Register of Deeds, Center, Knox County, Nebraska are as follows:

- 1887 Deed July 22, 1887, recorded October 31, 1887, Book I Page 121, James A. Cooley, single to Benjamin F. and Edwin H. Chambers. For consideration of \$200 for numerous lots in Cooley's Addition
- 1890 Deed July 1, 1890, recorded August 21, 1890, Book N Page 46, Edwin H. and Stella Chambers to George W. Chambers. For consideration of \$400 for undivided half of properties
- 1913 Quit Claim Deed December 5, 1913, recorded January 14, 1914, Book 45 Page 63, Lizzie Sherwood (daughter of Benjamin Chambers) to May Chambers (wife of George). For consideration of \$100 for numerous properties.
- 1913 Quit Claim Deed September 20, 1913, recorded January 14, 1914, Book 45 Page 62, Mary B. Wood, et al (Sarah Chambers, widow, Edwin H. and Stella Chambers, Alice B. and J. W. Turner, Sarah M. and William Mason) to May Chambers. For consideration of \$100 for numerous properties.
- 1944 Deed April 8, 1944, recorded April 10, 1944, Book 70 Page 290, May Chambers, widow of George to Helen Chambers, daughter. For consideration of \$1.00 for lots 1, 2, 3, Block 6
- 1949 Estate Settlement October 14, 1949, recorded October 14, 1949, Book 6 Page 413. Real property was devised to various living heirs. Final account of B. N. Saunders and George G. Bayha, Administrations in Estate of George Chambers, deceased, who owned lots 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, block 6, Cooley's Addition.
- 1949 Deed December 3, 1949, recorded January 5, 1950, Book 77 Page 57, Stewart Chambers, et al (son of George) to Clarence Carson and wife for consideration of \$4,000.
- 1950 Affidavit January 9, 1950, recorded January 9, 1950, Book 17 Page 464, Stewart Chambers to The public. Statement of title ownership and certification

1958 Deed November 5, 1958, recorded January 13, 1959, Book 83 Page 627, Clarence N. Carson and wife to William J. Mayberry. For consideration of \$6,000 for lots 1, 2, 3.

1975 Deed March 3, 1975, recorded March 5, 1975, Book 97, Page 29, William J. Mayberry and wife to United States of America (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers). For consideration of \$22,000 for lots 1, 2, 3.

4. Builder, contractor: Joseph A. Cavis was the builder. F. Showalter was his assistant.
5. Original plan and construction: According to the Niobrara Tribune, dated January 20, 1910:

"Mr. and Mrs. George Chambers are moving into their elegant new home this week. The house is finished in quarter sawed white oak and floors are of the same material. the walls are frescoed (sic).... A few of the conveniences are a furnace and hot water, heat, gas fixtures, a bathroom, hot and cold water and George expects to have a soft water tubular well....The work on the staircase, fireplace, double doors and in fact the whole house, is done in a very satisfactory manner...."

According to Stewart Chambers, son of George W. Chambers, the house was originally painted white with black trim screens. The house was repainted at an unknown date a lemon yellow with screens again black. It was later returned to the original white exterior and has remained white ever since. The original cherry clapboard siding still remains with interior woodwork of white oak. The house also had "double floors built with 2 x 12 floor joists", according to Stewart Chambers.

6. Alterations and additions: Minor changes have been made to the house as evident in the view of the structure taken just after its construction in 1910 (see Sources of Information, Old views). The original projecting cornice found on the second story as well as on the one story front porch, has been removed leaving just the exposed supporting rafters.

In addition, a pediment with decorative cresting, which at one time rested on the hipped, one-story porch roof, directly over the entryway, has been removed. Also, decorative supporting pilasters, reflecting the style of the remaining Ionic columns supporting the front porch roof, have been removed.

The original cedar shingling remains but has been covered with interlocking mineral surface asphalt shingles.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

George Wilkerson Chambers moved to Niobrara with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin F. Chambers in 1877. Upon his arrival, he met Judge Solomon Draper, one of the town's founding fathers, a lawyer and, at that time, associated with the Niobrara Valley Bank. Mr. Chambers began work at the bank doing odd jobs while still in school. After completing school, however, he became the bank's bookkeeper, later to be promoted to assistant cashier and cashier. In addition, Mr. Chambers acquired controlling interests in the neighboring Lynch and Verdel, Nebraska banks, serving as their President for a number of years. His residence, one of the more imposing structures in Niobrara, was a further statement of Mr. Chambers' financial success. He lived in this house only three years before his death in 1913.

William J. Mayberry, the last occupant and private owner of the Chambers-Mayberry house, is a significant figure in the Niobrara community because of his active civic participation in civic matters over the years, and more particularly, for his annual Thresher's Reunion. The reunion, originally a neighborhood threshing bee, was initiated by Mr. Mayberry in the mid-1950s. Over the years, however, it has received much attention and publicity and is now considered a regional institution. The reunion takes people back in time with old threshing methods, such as actual demonstrations of horse-power threshing, a method predating the steam engine era. The operation of the steam thresher is also demonstrated. Mr. Mayberry's collection, in 1976, included nine steam engines, twelve tractors, numerous gasoline-powered tractors, an eight bottom plow and a saw mill.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views:

A photocopy of the front view of the house, circa 1910, shows original details which have been changed, and also how little the exterior appearance has been altered. Included in the HABS collection.

A photocopy of house being moved to Crofton, Nebraska, 1977. From an unknown source. Included in the HABS collection.

2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Deed Books, Register of Deeds, Center, Knox County, Nebraska.

Interviews:

Stewart Chambers, written correspondence, July 13, 1977 and July 22, 1977, provided background information on his father and details on the physical history of the house.

Tape of Mr. and Mrs. William Mayberry, Niobrara, Nebraska, Spring 1977. Information on threshers reunion.

Mr. and Mrs. Harley Eberly, August 15, 1977, residents of Niobrara, Nebraska. Provided background information on George Chambers.

William Mayberry June 28, 1977, regarding alteration details.

b. Secondary and published sources:

Niobrara Bicentennial Committee. Niobrara Centennial, 1856-1956 (updated 1976). Niobrara, Nebraska: Verdigre Eagle, 1976.

Niobrara Tribune. Newspaper articles, July 29, 1909, September 3, 1909, January 20, 1910.

Prepared by: Kathryn Burns
Historian
Historic American Buildings
Survey
Summer 1977

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Chambers-Mayberry House is designed in a simple Queen Anne style with classical details. The more dominant features are the steep hipped roof with east and south gabled dormers, decorative metal cresting and the long front porch supported by three wooden Ionic columns. The house is clad in white painted narrow cherry clapboards. The house was one of the most elaborate structures in the small rural community of Niobrara.
2. Condition of fabric: The over-all condition of the house is good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The house, rectangular with projecting bays, measures 29' x 37'. It is two stories with a large attic and full basement. The front porch measures 25'-6" x 9'-3". The rear porch measures 6' x 10'.
2. Foundations: The house sits on a poured-in-place concrete.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: The house is clad in white painted cherry clapboards. Decorative elements include eaves and corner boards with circular beaded strips at extreme corners and heavy ogee brackets supporting the roofline at the northeast and southeast corners.
4. Structural system: The structural system of the house is of wood frame construction.
5. Porches: A large front porch projects from the east facade. The porch roof is supported by three circular wooden columns with ornately decorated Ionic capitals. Wooden lattice work runs along the base of the porch. The flooring is grey painted tongue-and-groove wood. A second-story screened porch is above the front porch at the south end with its roof supported by square wooden columns of plain design. A one-story rear enclosed porch projects from the west wall of the kitchen, supported by concrete blocks. A rear (west) two-story porch is also screened and has a low, two-foot high beaded tongue-and-groove side wall and tongue-and-groove flooring.
6. Chimneys: The house has two brick chimneys. One rises from the peak of the hipped roof and the other from the north slope of the roof toward the rear of the structure.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The front entrance door is stained wood with a large rectangular glass pane running its length. The pane is bevelled at the edges and held in place by egg-and-dart molding. At the base and top of the door are applied wooden carvings. Two-over-two side lights are on either side of the door. The rear porch entrance door has a standard rectangular upper pane with three lower raised wooden panels.
 - b. Windows: The large window in the center of the front projecting bay to the left of the front entrance has a 1 1/2' x 4' upper pane of leaded glass with bevelled clear glass in a geometric pattern and a single operable lower pane.

All remaining windows on the first and second floor levels are one-over-one double-hung sash windows. All first floor windows, as well as a pair of windows on the center north elevation at the interior stair landing, have a molded entablature-like surrounding detail.

Gabled dormers on the east and south facades have semi-circular arched window openings. A smaller gable window above the second story porch has a triangular light with a simple tracery detail. The ground level two-pane rectangular windows provide natural lighting to the basement.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The roof is a massive hipped roof with projecting gabled dormers on the east and south slopes. The original cedar shingles have been covered by interlocking mineral surface asphalt shingles. Decorative tin cresting in a "club" pattern, rises along the peak of the hipped roof and dormer projections. A half hip roof projects over the rear (west) porch. The front porch has an elongated half hip roof.
- b. Cornice: Exposed projecting roof rafters now appear along the eaves. Originally, these rafters were encased by a heavy molded cornice.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: An enclosed stairway just off the first floor front hall leads to a full cellar. A furnace pit lies at the foot of the stairs and two coal storage rooms are located in the northeast corner. A curious triangular brick stack stands in the center of the cellar and supports the fireplace hearth in the first floor living room.
- b. First floor: The front entrance on the east side of the structure opens into a small hall with an open stairway to the right, and two large rooms, living and dining areas, off the hall to the left. The front living room is separated from the hall by sliding pocket doors. These doors also separate the living room from the dining area to the west. Through the hall to the rear of the structure, one passes through a small vestibule with a door leading to the cellar on the right and enters a

sizable kitchen. Doors off the kitchen on the south wall lead to the dining room and to the rear lavatory, which was once the pantry room. A back porch lies directly to the west of the kitchen.

- c. Second floor: The wide staircase from the first floor hall turns to the left and opens into the second floor hall. Four bedrooms are on this floor, one in each corner of the house. A full bath is at the west end of the hall. A small screened porch just over the front entry porch is accessible from the southeast corner bedroom.
 - d. Attic: An enclosed stairway off the northwest bedroom is the only access to the attic. The attic itself is a large open unfinished space. A central chimney stack runs up from the middle of the room at a slight angle and projects through the roof peak.
2. Stairways: The main stairway runs from the first floor entrance hall to the second floor. It is of wood. The newel post at the base of the handrail is carved with geometric and floral patterns. Three other enclosed staircases are found in the house. The first runs from the vestibule off the kitchen down to the basement. The second runs from the northeast corner of the kitchen up to the second floor hall, opening to the west of the main staircase. The third runs from the northwest corner bedroom up to the attic.
 3. Flooring: The house has four-inch hardwood flooring throughout. Tiled floors are found in the kitchen and second floor bathroom.
 4. Wall and ceiling finish: All rooms have simple painted plaster walls and natural woodworking of solid oak. Chair and picture railing details are found throughout the house.
 5. Doorways and doors: Two pairs of six-paneled pocket doors separate the living room from both the entrance hall and the rear dining area. Narrow full pane glass double doors open from the southeast bedroom onto the second story porch. All other doors are simple five-paneled horizontally set doors.

6. Notable Hardware: A decorative coal stove in the basement, using the triangular stack, has an urn on top and a mica door in front. Its style name and number is: Firefly, #23, Manufactured by the Orbon Stove and Range Company, Belleville, Illinois.

The living room fireplace and platform have light green glazed tiles and a metal coal grate elegantly designed with a religious scene. The surrounding mantel is dark stained wood supported by Ionic columns on either side of the fire place. A second mantel just above is supported by shorter, but similar, columns framing the mirror above the fireplace.

7. Mechanical equipment:

- a. Heating: Originally heated by a coal furnace, the heating system was converted to oil by the Mayberrys.
- b. Lighting: Most areas of the house are lighted by incandescent fixtures.

- D. Site:

1. General setting: The house faces east.
2. Landscape: The landscape is nicely maintained with lilac hedges along the south side of the property. A vegetable garden is located in the northwest side of the house.
3. Outbuildings: There is a wooden frame garage to the rear (west) of the house.

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Architect
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Summer 1977
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PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Niobrara project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in co-operation with the citizens of the Village of Niobrara. The project was funded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District, in compliance with Executive Order 11593 as a mitigative effort in the construction of the Gavins Point Dam and Lewis and Clark Lake. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, chief of HABS, the project was completed in the HABS Field Office in Niobrara, Nebraska during the summer of 1977 by project supervisor Perry Benson (University of Pennsylvania), project historian Kathryn A. Burns (George Washington University), team foreman Larry Jones (Texas Tech University) and student architects Peter Darlow (McGill University), Lisa Becker (Notre Dame University) and Darl Rastorfer (University of Pennsylvania). The written historical and architectural data was prepared by Kathryn Burns, and edited by Susan McCown, a historian in the HABS office in August 1979. Two exterior and four interior photographs were taken by Sam Amato in the fall of 1977.